Illinois Boys Reformatory School

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Jason Strevell was a young Pontiac attorney back in the 1850s. Mr. Strevell joined a men's club, and each month the club had a guest speaker. When it was Mr. Strevell's turn to arrange for the guest speaker, he enlisted another attorney named Abraham Lincoln to come to Pontiac and give a lecture in January of 1860. After Mr. Lincoln gave his lecture, he went to Mr. Strevell's home at 401 West Livingston Street in Pontiac to wait for his train home. Mr. Strevell asked Abe Lincoln how tall he was, and Mr. Lincoln replied he was six foot four inches tall. Mr. Strevell measured Mr. Lincoln's height in a doorway. Mr. Lincoln was indeed six foot four inches tall. The Livingston County Historical Society recently refurbished Mr. Strevell's Pontiac home, which is open for public tours.

Mr. Strevell went on to become an Illinois state congressman and State Senator. In the early 1870s, Illinois citizens decided to build a new reformatory school for young boys. In February 1871, State Senator Jason Strevell sponsored a bill to locate the new Illinois Boys Reformatory School in Pontiac, Illinois. Pontiac was selected as the site for the new school. In June of 1871, the first six young men, convicted of stealing horses in Peoria, arrived at the Illinois Boys Reformatory School in Pontiac.

The theory of the reformatory was to educate young criminals and teach them a trade. The reformatory trade education options included granite tombstone manufacturing, barbering, textile manufacturing, printing, carpentry, blacksmithing, pipe fitting, bricklaying, laundry work, engine work, electrical work, military drills, and farming.

In 1894, the reformatory averaged 2,132 inmates. The youngest boys were ten years of age. Most of the boys were between the ages of 16 and 20. In 1894, 79% of the inmates were in the 16 to 20 age group. That year, 1,160 inmates were white, and 210 were non-white boys.

The boys sent to the reformatory were convicted of many crimes. In 1894, the boys committed 53 different types of crimes. 76% of these crimes were theft-related. In 1894, twenty-six boys escaped from the reformatory. Twelve boys were captured, and three voluntarily returned to the facility.

The 1894 inmate data indicated most boys came from broken homes, and their parents were of lower incomes and poorly educated. In 1894, 45 percent of the boys came from Cook County.

After several years of operation, the reformatory management started to keep track of how successful they were at rehabilitating the young boys. In 1894, 86% of the boys left the reformatory and did not return because they had committed additional crimes. In

1904, management noted that over 5,000 boys had gone through the reformatory, and over 70% had become productive citizens.

In the early 1900s, several people and companies abused adult male prison labor in Illinois. Prison managers received kickbacks from companies for allowing these companies to use low-cost prison labor. Trade unions also complained the prisoners were taking jobs away from union members. As a result, new convict labor laws were passed in Illinois.

Although there was no labor abuse at the Pontiac reformatory, it fell under the same new laws as the adult prisons. At the reformatory, managers had to restrict or eliminate the teaching of specific trades covered by the new law. Since printing was not one of the specified trades, the reformatory expanded its printing plant operations and taught more boys the printing trade. The boys printed a weekly newspaper for all the boys to read.

Another innovation at the reformatory was allowing the boys to set up a government and bank. Only boys under the age of 17 could participate. The reformatory management allowed the boys to pass laws, and they were enforceable. The boys also operated a bank to serve all of the boys.

The reformatory had its own library. Eventually, the reformatory had over 12,000 books in its library. Some of these books were used in the classroom.

Most Livingston County citizens in that era viewed the reformatory favorably. Students at Fairbury area country schools often visited the facility on field trips. The reformatory had an excellent record of educating the young boys and teaching them a trade. Less than 20% of the boys had trouble with the law after finishing their sentences at the reformatory.

In 1893 the institution was changed from a boys' reformatory into a more conventional penal institution with the acceptance of inmates as old as twenty-one. The name of the institution was changed to the Illinois State Reformatory.

After 1904, many of the State's youngest juvenile offenders were no longer sent to Pontiac. They were placed in a new facility built in St. Charles, Illinois. This facility was named The Illinois School for Boys.

The Pontiac facility continued to evolve until it became the Pontiac Correctional Center. The current mission of the Pontiac Correctional Center is to protect the general public through incarceration, supervision, programs, and services designated to return offenders to the community with the skills to be useful and productive citizens.

The facility now consists of a total of 63 buildings, which comprise more than 744,000 square feet. The facility sits on a 37-acre site, with 32 acres enclosed by fencing. Pontiac Correctional Center houses the following offenders: segregation, protective custody, mental health, administrative detention reintegration management, and medium security.

For its first 20 years of existence, the Illinois Boys Reformatory School had a mission to educate and train boys between the ages of 10 and eighteen. The boys could learn any of 26 different trades. The facility was successful in that over 80% of the boys became productive members of society.

Boys learning the tinner's trade in the tin shop at the Reformatory in 1900.